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TAGS: PREL PGOV IS TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: THE CALM AFTER THE GAZA STORM

REF: A. ANKARA 229

1B. ANKARA 176

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara-Consulate General Istanbul cable.

12. (C) Summary: The Jewish Community in Turkey has reported a reduction in the level of anti-Semitic incidents precipitated by the Gaza crisis. This is likely due to a concerted effort on the part of the GOT to distinguish in their statements between the Jewish people and the Israeli Government in pre-local election political rhetoric and to encourage tolerance. There are also early indications that Turkey's bilateral relationship with Israel is on the mend, including the proposed visit of a high-level Israeli diplomat to Ankara. The Turkish and Israeli MFAs continue their work to rebuild the bilateral relationship and are optimistic that the difficult period has passed. End Summary.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES ADVOCATE FOR TOLERANCE

13. (C) In response to concerns that heated political rhetoric during the Gaza crisis has contributed to rising anti-Semitism, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) prepared a Friday February 6 sermon to be delivered at mosques throughout the country urging people to act with &common sense& respect for all persons (REF B). Without specifically addressing anti-Semitism, the sermon quoted a chapter from the Koran which instructed people not to commit slander or backbiting and warned that such actions could create division within communities. (Note: Slander and backbiting are viewed as sins in Islam. End Note.) In addition, Istanbul Mufti Cagrici reportedly directed all sub-provincial muftis, imams, and preachers not to say a &single word that would agitate the society.8

14. (C) Ankara's Kocatepe Mosque Imam Ismail Cosar told us that, in addition to the Diyanet passage, he underscored in his Friday 6 sermon that no one should deny the value of others. All people must live in peace; no one has the right to do harm. He expressed concern to us, however, that all of the spotlight on anti-Semitism could have the unintended consequence of proliferating the problem. By raising the profile of the issue, he argued, it could create a backlash from certain nationalist and fundamentalist groups.

JEWISH COMMUNITY SEES DECREASED TENSIONS

15. (C) On February 9, the Jewish Community held a second open

meeting for its members in Istanbul to discuss the recent rise in anti-Semitism following Israel's Gaza offensive. Vice President of the Jewish Community of Turkey Lina Filiba reported that over sixty percent of attendees at the most recent community gathering were under the age of thirty. The younger attendees came with questions about the impact of the current level of anti-Semitism on their safety and economic situation. Filiba said the meeting reminded her of similar personal concerns she had during tumultuous moments for the Jewish Community in the past. Then, the elders of the community would explain that everything would return to a normal level of calmness with time. Filiba commented that now, however, the leadership worries whether the relationship between the Jewish Community and the GOT or general Turkish society will return to their previous amicable levels. The vase has been broken, she commented.

¶ 16. (C) Filiba did acknowledge that the level of animosity has gone down significantly in the past two weeks since the end of the Gaza crisis. She related a story of a Jewish businessman from Istanbul's Sefakoy neighborhood who spoke at the February 9 meeting, describing how some of his clients refused to conduct business with him earlier in January. Since then, some have returned and said & apparently it was okay to work with Jewish Turks, as the Israelis are the problem.⁸ Filiba considered this a sign that the Diyanet's prayer message on Friday, February 6, and positive comments from other political leaders have begun to trickle down to the masses.

¶ 17. (C) Filiba commented that the student population at the
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Ulus Jewish School in Istanbul has increased from 350 to 610 students since the November 2003 synagogue bombings. She anticipates more Jewish parents will send their children to the school after the Gaza conflict due to recent complaints of verbal harassment of their children in non-Jewish schools.

The Ulus school has a potential maximum capacity of 700 students.

¶ 18. (C) Istanbul Deputy Governor for Minorities Yildirim Kadioglu said that his office received no calls from concerned Jewish Turks during the Gaza offensive. He did, however, get inquiries from Muslims who were worried about their Jewish neighbors. The Istanbul governor's office provided no concrete examples of additional actions taken to counter anti-Semitism other than the Diyanet's February 6 sermon.

RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL BEGINNING TO NORMALIZE

¶ 19. (C) Israeli Ambassador Gaby Levi told Ambassador February 6 that the two governments are trying to normalize relations. Levi commented that Deputy PM and GOT Spokesman Cemil Cicek's statement following the February 2 Cabinet meeting and President Gul's comments about reconciliation during his February 3-6 Saudi Arabia trip were quite helpful (reftel). The Ambassador commented that the possibility of rescheduling Gul's canceled January visit to Israel in May would be a good sign. Levi said that a lower-level visit might occur & sooner than you think.⁸ (Note: MFA U/S Apakan told Ambassador February 11 that his Israeli counterpart U/S Abrahomowitz is planning a trip to Ankara.) He added that public tension in Turkey has died down. Nevertheless, public perception is not the dominant factor. Turks take their cues from their leaders, who must continue to act responsibly.

COMMENT

¶ 110. (C) Now that images of the Gaza humanitarian situation are no longer prominently featured in daily news, heated emotions here are beginning to wane. This largely reflects a more qualified tone in political rhetoric and concerted

efforts like those of the Diyanet to encourage tolerance. The GOT is working to deal with isolated hot spots as they occur. When one journalist claimed that a local Justice and Development Party (AKP) branch had carried an article denying the Holocaust on its website, it was reportedly immediately removed. (Note: AKP officials publicly denied existence of the report, and claimed that what the journalist saw was the result of hackers. End Note) PM Erdogan and other AKP officials have been careful to qualify statements that could be construed as anti-Semitic and underscore that their criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza is focused on the GOI, not the Israeli people or Turkish Jews. Anti-Israel rhetoric may well continue to play a prominent role in populist speeches from government leaders, intended to rally core AKP supporters and pull nationalist votes from opposition parties prior to the March local elections. While GOT officials, and perhaps the AKP, may be ready to close the book on the last month's events, the Jewish Community is not. Concerns expressed by its leadership to us represent a huge shift in the way they view their relationship with the Turkish Government.

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Jeffrey